A NOT SO AMAZING GRACE, PLEASE

September 23, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Philippians 1:21-26
Matthew 20:1-16

"So the last will be first, and the first last."
-Matthew 20:16 (RSV)

Everybody knows that while grace may be amazing, it is not always logical, fair, natural, or easy. Every parent, every teacher, coach, scout leader, big brother, big sister, tutor, aunt, uncle... everybody knows that a child most needs love at the very moment he or she is most unlovable. That's what's so wonderful about grandparents - having them or being one. When you're little you know intuitively that your grandparents aren't keeping score by the same rules nor as carefully as your parents, aren't constantly judging, measuring, evaluating; and that your shirt hanging out, or dirt on your face, or an outburst of giggling during the grace before the meal will pretty much be accepted and maybe even welcomed with a hug. Grandparents know about grace, mostly because they're older, and people with the added perspective of a few more decades know their own dependence on grace - God's and other people's. Grandparents who are still married to each other know with a terrible clarity that it isn't because they are wonderful, charming, and irresistible that another human being has stuck with them for thirty-five or forty years, but because of forgiveness, acceptance, love in spite of all the failings, eccentricities, bad habits... that is to say grace.

It is just when we are most unlovely, just when our hands are absolutely empty, just when we've concluded that there isn't much about us that commends itself to anyone - that we are accosted by the amazing contradictions of grace. A friend of mine told me she had been hearing about God's grace all her life; had heard countless sermons on the prodigal son's father running down the road to welcome him home. It really hadn't meant much to her personally until she found herself sitting in a pew one Sunday morning hearing it all again, only this time her son was home in bed, with a bad hangover and cuts and bruises on his face. He and his fifteen year-old friends had been drinking while my friend and her husband were out, and emboldened by alcohol had decided to take a ride in the family station wagon, which he had driven into a telephone pole a block away from home. Fortunately, no one was seriously hurt, but my friends had

spent the night between the emergency room and then the police station; and now the boy was home in his room sleeping it off while my friend was in church. She said she knew for the first time what the meaning of grace was; how tough it is to love a youngster you'd really like to put in his place; how little grace has to do with emotion and feeling nice and warm and wonderful; and how costly it is and how absolutely and ultimately amazing. She never told me what she did or said when she went home, but my sense is that she knew he must have felt about as awful about himself, even if he couldn't find the words to say it, and that he really didn't need confirmation that what he did was stupid, dangerous and illegal: truly didn't need to be verbally assaulted and told that he was without redeeming social value and had just ruined the whole family's reputation. My guess is she walked into the room gave him a hug and said breakfast is served and then we'll talk about how you're going to help pay to repair the car. Anyhow, I don't think he ever did it again, and he's an attorney today.

It is more than therapeutic. Grace has sociological ramifications - the lack of it, that is - because if we sometimes find this notion a little too amazing to handle on an interpersonal level, we are positively offended by it on a social or political level. There was an important and devastating feature in the New York Times Magazine two weeks ago, "Why Is America Failing Its Children?" Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, a pediatrician at Harvard Medical School, author of books on child care and a columnist for Family Circle Magazine, says flatly what anyone knows who drives out Division Street and simply looks around. "We are the least family oriented society in the civilized world."

Brazelton reports on the visit by the National Commission on Children to a high security prison in South Carolina to talk to teen-agers serving time for rape, murder and armed robbery. "Many of the young men, white and black, carried the signs of intractable poverty: the shifty, gaze-avoiding look with head half-cocked that says, 'Hit me again, I'm no good.'"

He and his pediatric staff know "By nine months of age, the babies who show signs that they expect to fail for the rest of their lives can be identified by various tests." Programs to help are known, doable and not really as expensive as the later costs to society to deal with the results. "To succeed," he reports, "a program has to make people feel as if they are individuals worthy of help. How is that done? It might mean that someone has to enter the bleak world of poor families to help clean up their houses, for example, to buy their groceries and play with their children." Would you like to sell that to taxpayers? I served on a County Welfare Board once in central Indiana, where the County Commissioner believed that food stamps were a communist plot; and we hired several homemakers to go to our clients' homes and do something like that: do a little creative shopping, help cook a meal, read to the kids. When the County Commissioner heard about it, he raised the roof because the "taxpayers weren't about to provide maid service to people too lazy to work," and, of course, cut our budget.

Dr. Brazelton writes, most poignantly, about the children who need help from the day they're born, "the ones born addicted to alcohol and hard drugs like crack and heroine," whose nervous systems are scrambled. "Few people," he says, "could love these babies... They are either limp and

unresponsive or are hypersensitive and behave chaotically. They have difficulty receiving and responding to the stimuli of a soothing voice or face. When they are cuddled or rocked, they react with piercing wails and jerky motions." He tells about dealing one-on-one with a baby like that who was out of control, unattractive, would not accept a pacifier, would not focus visually on anything. He literally forced the little girl to suck her own fist and held a bright red ball in front of her for a very long time, until she focused and relaxed and her face brightened and she followed him with her eyes. She was not brain damaged. She was not blind. Now she could see. Amazing Grace. Expensive Grace. Costly Grace. Tough, determined grace... Not So Amazing Grace, Please.

In the middle of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, Peter, who I have been calling Jesus' strongest and best friend, asks a series of straightforward, honestly human questions. They are the very questions I think you and I would have asked had we been there. First he challenges Jesus' expansive statement about the probability of suffering, crucifixion and death. Next he asks, "How many times should I forgive my neighbor? "Seven times?" This morning he has just said to Jesus, "We have left all to follow you," and the sense of it is that Peter wants a little assurance that his reward at the end of the day, whenever that happens to be, will in some way be commensurate with the enormity of his sacrifice. And this prompts Jesus to tell a parable which, when people think about it for more than a moment, usually disturbs them, offends them even. That's okay by the way. A modern New Testament scholar, John Dominic Crossan, says that "not liking" the parables is appropriate because their purpose is to undermine conventional security. The function of a parable is to say "you have a lovely home there. Too bad its built on an earthquake fault." [Models of God, Sally McFague, p. 49-51]

And for what it is worth, when I checked my text card file I discovered that I've never used this text before. I think it is because I don't much like it either. It assaults some of my deepest convictions about fairness and hard work and rewards.

It's harvest time. The grapes are ready. The time is right. The big vineyard owner eeds day laborers today. Lots of them. So he goes to the town square at six a.m. when day laborers assemble in order to find work and he hires everyone there - for the going rate. He goes back at nine o'clock and hires some more. As the day progresses he knows that he won't get the entire harvest in with the men he has retained so in he goes again at noon and at three o'clock p.m. and hires everybody he can. Finally, five o'clock p.m., one hour left, and he hires yet another group.

At six o'clock the work day is over. The laborers gather to be paid before heading home. The employer starts with the last hired and pays them a full day's wage. In ascending order he pays his laborers - the same amount. The ones who have worked twelve hours through the blistering heat of mid-day can't believe their eyes. Surely, he'll add a bonus to their pay. They have worked all day. But their wage remains the same. No less, no more than the amount they had agreed on. They complain... not so much about the amount they were given when you think about it, but about the employer's extravagant generosity. His generosity does not feel fair to them. This grace is, frankly, a little too amazing.

There is in this parable a radical word about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. At the moment he told it he was surrounded by good solid religious people who all their lives had obeyed the law, kept the religious tradition, given alms, attended synagogue, said their prayers. And they could not understand how he, this self-proclaimed spokesperson for God, could spend so much of his time and energy with people who had very little going for them, religiously and morally speaking. It's not that he was treating them, the good folk, badly. It was his peculiar generosity with those other folk. Surely there is something out of sync here. It does not compute.

It is precisely the point. The God who spoke and lived in Jesus is not a heavenly accountant, a ledger keeper, handing out rewards on the basis of merit, goodness achieved, hours put in. We rather wish it were that way. In our heart of hearts, we have trouble believing it is not so. But this God who came near in the life of Jesus, is more like the grand-parent with whom I began, whose love extends to all, whose grace has a life and energy of its own and is not dependent on the cleanliness, good manners, politeness and lovability of the child.

It is a powerful story about a grace so amazing it always assaults us, as it was intended to do.

There is, I believe, an ethical imperative here. Jesus wanted his disciples, his church, to be a visible alternative to the world's habit of dividing the human race into insiders and outsiders. The story doesn't tell us after all why the eleventh hour laborers were not hired at six a.m. Maybe they had to walk ten miles to get there. Maybe they were unemployed because there was no work where they lived. Maybe there was no transportation system from ghetto to suburbs where the jobs are. Maybe they had lived all their lives where their parents and grandparents had lived, in the same dirty, smoky, industrial city, 100 miles from any work other than the mill, mine or railroad. Maybe they walked slow and got there at three o'clock or five o'clock because they were old or crippled or half blind or sick. This is not an economic model for the operation of a profitable agri-business. But it is a model of a community of people who live in the middle of the world in which the needs of the workers are part of the equation, and therefore a Kingdom in which the strong and healthy ones who worked all day long rejoice that the ones who didn't and couldn't work all day - can afford to eat dinner tonight and feed their children. Jesus called it the Kingdom of Heaven.

There is here a powerful challenge to the privileged, the ones blessed by birth, geography, race and economics. There is here a culture which is counter to the one in which a person's worth is based on success in business, professional accomplishment, social status, family connections or university attended. There is here, for the church, an inclusive banner erected in the middle of an upwardly mobile, success-driven life style which reminds us that we live ultimately in a Kingdom where the love of God for all people extends to each one absolutely. equally.

It is the hardest thing for us to accept, says Henri Nouwen... "that God can love all human beings with the same unlimited love while loving each one of them in a totally unique way." [Lifesigns, p. 46]

It is a strange arithmetic, someone said. It is not based on equivalency. It is not a quid pro quo religion, this Gospel.

The parable assaults our convictions, challenges our morality - but I don't think judgment is its true purpose. Finally, I think it contains very good news; but in order to hear the good news, you have to read it and hear it from the bottom up, not the top down. You see, you and I are so accustomed to the image of ourselves as privileged, proper and successful that we automatically assume this parable is judgment for us. And it is. But it is also good news if we can hear what it is saying to and for the laborers who were hired at the eleventh hour.

Beneath our bluster and drivenness and out-of-control busyness, I'm not sure that most of us, theologically speaking, don't feel at home more among the ones who only worked an hour and whose needs were very real. Beneath it all, at the level inside us which can only be called spiritual, I'm not sure we feel very adequate, or even very good about ourselves. Compared to the high-powered certainty, the triumphant moralism of the religious people on television, or the ones who sneak up to us on street corners, or cocktail parties and announce that they know exactly where they're going to spend eternity and where we're going to spend eternity, and it's a shame... compared to that, I'm not sure we think we have very much to commend us to divine justice. I believe that each of us, regardless of who we are, wonders if we aren't going to arrive at the day of judgment with too little, too late in the day. I believe that many of us work very, very hard all our lives to document our worth, our value, our very being, to save our own souls. Somewhere deep inside us there is a hunger and a thirst for amazing grace.

At the end of a strenuous volume of systematic theology Canadian scholar, Douglas John Hall, wrote simply and eloquently about the final religious mystery: "that God should love." And then this intriguing observation: "In much imaginative literature and art, it is possible to find a poignant realization of what it could mean to the human spirit were it to know itself befriended by something or someone transcending its own being." Hall says that yearning accounts for the enormous popularity of Stephen Spielberg movies. It's why people come in off the street and weep over motion pictures like "E.T." [Thinking the Faith, p. 412]

In the wonderful PBS television special, "Amazing Grace," several artists said the same thing. Judy Collins recalled how audiences in the most difficult days of the early 70s stopped and listened to "Amazing Grace" as if they already knew it - which is Hall's point. We know about grace because of our hunger for it. Collins said that it saved her life. Night after night singing, "Thro' many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come: 'Tis grace hath bro't me safe thus far. And grace will lead me home," is probably what got her through a struggle with addiction.

Jesse Norman told about coming out on stage at the end of a rock concert to benefit Nelson Mandella who was still in prison, and facing

70,000 steamed-up, turned-on rock fans and singing "Amazing Grace" to a suddenly and strangely silent audience. "Think of it" she said, and you couldn't help think about this hymn, written two hundred years ago by an Anglican priest who had been a slave trader until his slow and thoughtful conversion to Christianity, sung by a black American opera star, to benefit a victim of apartheid. Amazing!

At the beginning, and at the end, a black woman, not young, with a child on her lap who could have been her grandson, sang it in her church, sang it with all the integrity and passion of her life experience and said about it, "This one gets to almost everybody."

We could live a little more comfortably and conventionally with a not-so-amazing grace, please: with a little less extravagance and generosity. And most of us do.

But we are loved just as we are, with as much or as little as we bring, by a God whose grace is amazing; who has made the costly decision to love each extravagently.

We are called to know that, to accept it, to say "yes" to it, to rejoice in its sweetness, to let it convert us, to let it live in us, and us in it.

"The Kingdom of heaven," Jesus said one day, "is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard."

Amen.